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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study of a male kindergarten teacher in inner-city Milwaukee (Wisconsin) provides a picture of a classroom in which children from one of the city's most troubled neighborhoods work peacefully as they learn reading, writing, and other school knowledge. Most important, perhaps, is that they learn a way to act and participate in school that will serve them throughout their lives. Observations from the study show that the teacher works to create a safe, warm environment by making connections with home and family, by assuring children that nothing bad is going to happen, and by encouraging laughing and joking. He also makes the classroom a predictable text by building the days and weeks from events and activities that are consistent throughout the school year, and he spends much time and energy on direct teaching of what the children are supposed to do. These practices reflect notions of culturally relevant teaching found in the work of L. Delpit and G. Ladson-Billings. (SLD)

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"When you're in my classroom, I'm your Dad"
Supporting Children's Learning in an Inner-city Kindergarten Classroom

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Abstract

Joe Bastian is a kindergarten teacher in inner city Milwaukee. His classroom is one where children from one of the city's most troubled neighborhoods work peacefully as they learn reading, writing and other school knowledge. Most important, perhaps, they learn a way to act and participate in school that will serve them well throughout their lives. Observations discussed in this ethnographic study of Joe Bastian's classroom showed that he worked to create a safe, warm environment by making connections with home and family, by assuring the children that nothing bad is going to happen, and by encouraging laughing and joking. He also made the classroom a predictable text by building the days and weeks from events and activities that were consistent throughout the school year, and spent much time and energy on directly teaching children what they are supposed to do. These practices reflected notions of culturally relevant teaching found in the work of Delpit and Ladson-Billings.

"When you're in my classroom, I'm your Dad"
Supporting Children's Learning in an Inner-city Kindergarten Classroom

Joe Bastian is a man in his late twenties, married and the father of a young child. He appears even younger; his blond crew cut, wide blue eyes, slight build, and casual style of dress suggest that he might still be a college student. Joe's job is intensely challenging; he loves it and is deeply dedicated to it. Joe taught kindergarten for several years at Malley Avenue School, in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee's inner city. [Today Joe has moved to another elementary school in the city.] Twenty-five children, mostly African-American, came each day to Joe's sunny, first-floor room at the east end of the school building to begin their lives as students; Joe's task was to prepare each of them to flourish in school.

When Joe was studying for his master's degree, I visited his classroom in the role of a professor trying to understand the situations in which my students taught. When his degree program was finished, I asked Joe to let me spend time there on a regular basis, and the thirteen observations I made during the first semester of the 1994-95 school year are the basis of this paper. I have used Joe Bastian's real name, at his request, but have changed the names of the school and of all the children who are mentioned.

Methodology

Each time I went to Joe's room I took a notebook and pen, and tried to record what I saw and heard and the questions I had about what went on. Joe, always friendly and patient with my curiosity, was willing to answer the questions I had, and those answers I also recorded in my field notes. After each session I wrote in a journal about what I had seen and what sense I was making of it. Later I thanked Joe for letting me "bug" him by observing in his classroom. He answered,

"It's an open classroom -- bug away. We like visitors." I transcribed the notes from my thirteen visits to Joe's classroom, and shared the transcripts with him, asking whether he felt I had described his classroom accurately. We have also talked over his response to a draft of this paper, and to the interpretations I made of his actions and intentions. The analysis of the data I collected has been emergent, beginning with the journal entries after the first observation, and continuing through the observations, my conversations with Joe, further journals, and successive drafts of this article. Material from my notes and journals is italicized.

Questions

Why did I choose to go to Joe's classroom as a researcher?

The very first time I visited Joe's classroom I felt comfortable, welcome, and relaxed. My initial impression was of an excellent teacher whose work I could respect. I had learned from Ray McDermott, the noted educational anthropologist, to take that feeling of comfort and respect as a sign that I can do worthwhile work in a setting. Like him, I only work with teachers I respect and admire. As he says, it would be too difficult -- and pointless -- to spend time where one feels uncomfortable and critical (McDermott, 1989).

In addition, Joe's classroom promised the possibility of answers to a question that had troubled me since I myself was a kindergarten teacher in inner-city Washington D.C. How could a teacher have a classroom in which children have many choices and many opportunities to learn and at the same time in which children's behavior does not interfere with their learning?

What ideas from the literature did I bring to my observations in Joe's' classroom?

Lisa Delpit (1995) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) were the two authors I thought most about as I observed Joe's classroom and analyzed what I had seen. I wanted to know whether my intuitive sense of Joe's "good teaching," and the framework I developed for

understanding it, were compatible with their ideas about what constitutes "good teaching" in classrooms where many of the children are African-American. Later I read Claudia Ballenger's (1992) article, "Because you like us: The language of control," describing her work with Haitian children, and George Noblit's (1993) article, "Power and Caring," describing an African-American teacher's interaction with her students. These also were sources of related questions about Joe's' teaching.

Lisa Delpit's (1995) book, *Other People's Children*, centers on an intensely honest discussion of contrasting beliefs among more conservative African-American teachers and progressive white teachers about what constitutes good teaching for African-American children. In a section (*11-14*) that connects not only with what I saw in Joe's classroom but also with my own past experience as a kindergarten teacher in inner-city Washington D.C., Delpit tells how she brought the progressive methods she learned in her teacher education program to an urban classroom in Philadelphia. Two aspects of her experience seemed especially significant to me. The first was her observation that the unstructured classroom she created was a place where white students learned and flourished, while African-American students played but lagged in learning literacy and other school knowledge. The second was her description of her own development as a teacher during six years in urban schools. She began as an "exceptional" African-American teacher, aligned with younger white teachers as progressives in the school. Most African-American teachers were older and conservative, even "repressive," according to the young progressives (*12*). Over the six years, Delpit became more like those older teachers as she sought ways to encourage her African-American students to achieve school success. She was able to accomplish at least part of her goal, though a gap remained between the success of the two cultural groups, leaving her feeling uneasy about herself as a teacher.

Delpit's description of this experience took me back to my own kindergarten teaching days. I was fully committed to progressive methods, but taught in schools with so few white students that the kinds of comparisons Delpit made were not available to me. What I did experience was constant questioning on the part of African-American colleagues of the choices I was making in my classroom. As in Delpit's Philadelphia classroom, children sometimes "threw books around the learning stations" and "practiced karate moves on the new carpets" (*13*). Fellow teachers would ask, "Where is your structure? Don't you understand that 'these children' need structure?" Resistant but uneasy, I worked to create a classroom in which children both learned and had choices. In Joe Bastian's classroom, I reached a new understanding of what "structure" could mean, and of what a teacher could do to prevent book throwing and karate and promote children's learning, without being "repressive."

Ladson-Billings' (1994) book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*, focuses on the idea of culturally relevant teaching. The successful teachers she studied, whether white or African-American, taught in ways that connected the classroom and the curriculum to the lives and experiences of the students. She describes teachers who know the families, know the neighborhood in which they teach, and bring this knowledge into interactions in the classroom. Having recently read her book made me alert to the many times I saw Joe Bastian making those connections. What was significant for me was the recognition that culturally relevant teaching is not based on some political or academic notion of culture that divides people into labeled groups and defines the culture they should possess. Instead, it focuses on the lived culture of the students, known to the teacher through personal interaction inside and outside the classroom. When Joe described his visits to the homes of the children, chose to supervise children waiting to be picked up by parents outside the school so that he could

talk with those parents, and included much talk about family activities in the flow of classroom life, he was enacting the cultural relevance defined by Ladson-Billings.

Ballenger (1992) taught young Haitian children in an Eastern city setting. Like Delpit, she came to the classroom with progressive views that called for the teacher to avoid the role of disciplinarian, offer choices to children, and share control of the classroom with children. What is particularly interesting about her account of her experience is that the children themselves – not only, as in my case, her fellow teachers – were quite direct in letting her know that they wanted her to exercise control. They said, as her article's title implies, that it was because she liked them that she was willing to control their behavior. They felt safer when rules and expectations were clear, as they apparently were in their homes. Although I did not see children in Joe Bastian's classroom actually praising him for the structure, consistency and control he provided in the classroom, Ballenger helped me think about what was being accomplished by this aspect of Joe's teaching.

Noblit (1993) was a researcher in a classroom whose African-American teacher took a more overtly powerful stance in dealing with the children than Noblit at first thought was appropriate. His article is notable for his honest account of how his personal evaluation of this teacher's work changed as he came to understand how her power was related to her caring about the children. She understood their needs in this respect in ways that seem to reflect Ladson-Billings' (1994) notion of culturally relevant teaching. Although I did not see Joe Bastian deviate from his consistently gentle approach to the children, the effort he put into helping them be clear about his expectations for their behavior was great. He did not resist setting rules and letting children know exactly how to follow them and why that was important. Noblit and

Ballenger (1992) helped me see how that, too, was part of what made him fit Delpit's (1995) and Ladson-Billings' (1994) criteria for successful teaching.

Description of Joe's Classroom

Physically, Joe's classroom is an attractive place, though the building dates from the late nineteenth century. It has hardwood floors and original wood trim. Walls facing south and east (with a rounded bay) hold high windows that often flood the room with light. You have to live in Milwaukee to know how important this is; winter so close to Lake Michigan can include weeks without sight of the sun, and light is a treasure.

This room was built as a kindergarten room; the west wall includes a fireplace (long since blocked off) with a surround of tiles depicting Mother Goose rhymes. The classroom rabbit, named Spot, lives in a cage placed in the grate, though he is free to hop around the room most of the time. He's not a young rabbit, though, and often sits in or next to his cage for long periods. On the north side of the room is a coat closet with a small refrigerator in one end, used to store food for cooking projects -- or a whole fish for a printing project.

Under the south windows is a rug, where the class meets to talk and hear stories. In the east-facing bay are areas for block construction and housekeeping play. In the center of the room, a loft rises next to the house area, allowing for a sheltered space for that kind of play. Its second level is used for reading and for puppet and dramatic play. Most of the rest of the room holds tables, surrounded by small chairs, at which children create art, cook, write their journals, use manipulative materials, and listen to tapes. There is a painting easel near the closet, and a row of MacIntosh computers near the fireplace.

Joe's classroom is part of the Milwaukee Public Schools' High Scope program; the curriculum is based on the ideas of Weikart, et al. (1971). Time is allowed each day for the Plan-

Do-Review experience that is the heart of High Scope. Children gather to plan what they will be doing; they carry out (do) their plans; afterwards they verbally review what they did. Each day, Key Experiences are provided for the children in areas like science, cooking, math, and language. This is a curriculum I've been familiar with since the mid-1970s, so I had a good sense of knowing what was going on.

But the comfort I felt in the room was not just a matter of the physical surroundings or the familiar curriculum. Both when I visited as Joe's professor, and later when I was there as a researcher with a completely different group of children, I found a place where children were nearly always going about their business in a happy and self-controlled way.

In all the time I was there, I saw only one child subjected to a time out, when she persisted in throwing toys out of the loft. When two children had a conflict, they would usually call for Joe, and he would help them talk out their problem of taking turns or hurting feelings or bumping on the playground. Something other than the approaches to classroom discipline described in literature I had read (e.g., Cangelosi, 1988) seemed to be going on. Being in a place where children and teachers were working so happily was what felt so comfortable to me.

During the six years I worked with groups of teachers in Milwaukee's urban schools, I saw and heard of many classrooms where there was little opportunity for students to learn. Sometimes, conditions were so chaotic, with students arguing, fighting, and remaining completely off task for long periods, that even a student who was highly motivated to learn would have little chance of doing so. In some other classrooms, this chaotic situation was prevented through disciplinary tactics so repressive that the only learning tasks that could be offered were those requiring rote memory and copying. In these classrooms, many children

seemed to do virtually nothing during class. I wanted to know how Joe was avoiding these twin pitfalls.

Insert Figure 1 near this point

Observations of Joe's Teaching

Establishing a Safe, Warm Environment

I first visited Joe's classroom on September 7, 1994, about a week after school had started. I came in late in the afternoon, when the children were in the middle of their Plan-Do-Review sequence. Here are some of the events I observed on that first day.

** Joe has a large blob of blue tempera paint on his khaki pants. One of the children, sounding rather anxious, asks him whether he will get in trouble for having made a mess of his pants. Joe assures him that the paint will come out. He says that to get out the paint he will have to wash his pants carefully when he gets home.*

** Joe is in the computer area, where three little boys -- they do look little -- are using the machines. One has mysteriously managed to access a program that is not supposed to be there. Joe helps him click into the program he is looking for. He says, "As long as we've got the right thing now, it doesn't matter what happened."*

** Three girls wheel a baby carriage with dolls in it to the computer area. Joe stops to talk with them. He asks if they want to see his baby, and gets out his wallet and shows the girls a picture of his months-old son.*

** An announcement from the principal comes over the loudspeaker. Joe says, "Everybody freeze," and everybody does....*

Later I wrote my first comments on what I had observed.

I hear Joe guiding the kids in a variety of ways. He helps them feel safe at the computers; he makes clear that spilling something on yourself is not a disaster; he shows them a picture of his baby.

Each of these interactions, I thought, was part of Joe's intention to make his room seem safe to the children. Things can go wrong, but a child doesn't have to be afraid of getting into trouble. The teacher is a real person, who has a baby at home, just as a child has younger siblings. These events from the first classroom visit I made reflected two of the three ways I found that Joe made his classroom safe and warm: 1) connections with home and parents; 2) making clear that nothing bad is going to happen; and 3) laughing and joking.

Connecting with home and parents. Joe and the children often talked about their homes and families. For instance, during my ninth visit, on November 11, I watched Joe and a group of children cooking French toast. Cooking activities were included in choice time during many weeks, and cooking often involves waiting for things to get hot or be finished or be ready. It also involves eating. Thus, I noticed, whenever Joe was cooking with children there was a lot of conversation, and this conversation was often about the children's life at home.

On this day, talk was sparked by the fact that when the children went to the refrigerator to get eggs, butter and milk for the French toast, they saw that in the refrigerator was a good-size fish, wrapped in plastic. [It would later be used to make fish prints.] For example, *Michael tells about his aquarium. Then he talks about his fishing trip with his Dad. He caught a blue gill. Other children tell whether they go fishing or not, and what they do when they go fishing.*

Later, they talk about someone's Cousin Tyler. It is at times like this that the line between school and home is crossed. Joe often mentions what he does at home, or how his baby is doing.

These conversations allow the children to make a strong bridge between their familiar lives at home and the unfamiliar environment of the school.

Joe also works hard to establish direct connections with the children's parents. My third visit to his room took place during a meeting for all the kindergarten parents. Parents were invited to come, bringing their younger children, to hear about what their kindergarten children would be doing and learning during the year. This meeting was part of the Milwaukee High Scope program, with its strong focus on parent involvement. My notes on the meeting indicate that Joe stood out from the other teachers who spoke because of his brief, clear presentation of the topic he was to cover. He seemed to have a good sense of how to speak with the parents in a helpful way.

When Joe was a member of my graduate class, he proudly told the group that he had achieved one hundred percent attendance by parents at one set of twice-a-year scheduled conferences. Although attendance at such conferences tends to be higher in the lower grades, Joe's students come from a neighborhood in which many families are living with serious problems, and perfect attendance seemed to his fellow students and fellow Milwaukee Public School teachers to be a minor miracle.

Joe said he had visited the home of each of his students early in the year. Home visits are an expected part of Milwaukee's High Scope program, but I had observed that many of the teachers leave this work to program paraprofessionals whose primary responsibility is parent contact. Joe, however, had done this time-consuming task himself. His assistant really didn't want to do it, he said, so he just did it himself.

In addition, he made every effort to speak with parents as they brought their children to school and picked them up. He was often the teacher who was responsible for children who were

waiting outside for their parents to arrive. Thus, he had an ongoing relationship in place with many of the parents. He knew what was happening in the children's homes. I observed one instance of this knowledge and interest during my eleventh visit, on December first.

An older child comes to get the lunch and attendance counts. The children are gathered on the rug, and stop what they are doing to count. Joe mentions that Tenise has not been here for a long time. As if on cue, two of Tenise's cousins, who are older students at Malley Avenue School, come in. Joe drops everything to get phone numbers and addresses where Tenise is staying. He tells the children that Tenise has been absent because she has asthma that is aggravated by cold weather. Thus, he reminds the children that even if she is absent a lot through the winter, Tenise is still part of their class. And he clearly cares about what is going on with her and her family.

One last aspect of Joe's connection with parents has to do with something I didn't see or hear. Although Joe and I have had many conversations in the course of our relationship, I have almost never heard him offer any criticism of parents. Although Joe meets the parents of his students across a divide of cultural and economic difference, he seems to assume that they care about their children and are doing the best they can. Possibly this accepting attitude is transmitted to the children and adds to the safe and warm environment they experience.

Nothing bad is going to happen. Blaming is something Joe avoids, and teaches the children to avoid. He accepts that both he and the children will make mistakes, and expects that they can be corrected. During my second visit, *a girl who dropped a tray full of markers quietly picked them up*; no one said she had done a bad thing. During my fourth visit, when Joe was doing a science experiment on the rug with several students and sending them from the rug to

find objects that would sink or float, *a boy gets up out of turn and steps on a girl's hand. She squeals, "He stepped on my hand."*

This is how Joe handles this minor crisis: *Joe says, "OK, you two [including the girl) go pick something. And you [looking at the boy], just sit so it won't happen again."* Clearly, the girl was not hurt. She hurries off on her errand and the boy sits right down.

On my eleventh visit, on November 22, I see this incident:

Some students are looking at a homemade Big Book with a plastic spiral binding. The binding is starting to come off. Loquita brings it to Joe. She says Ricky made the binding come off. Joe replies, "I think it just happened by itself. I don't think anybody did it on purpose. I don't think it's right to accuse someone if you don't know they did it."

Joe avoids blaming, and so should the children.

On my fifth visit, on October 4, a similar problem comes up. They have just returned from their physical education class, and are sitting on the rug. *Arnette is saying repeatedly, "Mr. Bastian, Mr. Bastian." She gets up and walks up to him, rubbing her eye. She says, "Mr. Bastian, James bumped me in the eye." Joe asks, "Was it in the gym? Was it when you were playing ball?" Arnette says, "Yes." Joe asks her, "Do you think it was on purpose or by accident?" She shrugs. Joe says, "Well, tell him what he did." Arnette says, "Mr. Bastian, he bumped me in the eye." Joe says, "Tell him, tell him, don't tell me." She turns to James and says, "Don't bump my eye." Joe says to James, "Now, what do you say to her?" James replies, "I'm sorry." And Joe adds, "OK, now be careful."*

What struck me about this interchange is that nobody is in trouble. No effort is made to find out if Arnette is making a fuss over nothing or if James was too rough. The possibility that it was all an accident is suggested. And Joe helps Arnette and James handle the problem in a

"no-fault" manner that is good practice for not getting into fights over minor matters. This policy of Joe's seems to parallel his accepting attitude toward the children's parents.

Laughing and joking. Another way that Joe establishes the safe, warm environment that characterizes his room is through his willingness to have fun with the children. My notes contain many instances of their laughing and joking together. Here are just a few examples. During my fifth visit, on October 4: *The kids come back from gym. They gather on the rug. Joe comes in and tells them to give themselves a pat on the back and then to give themselves a hug for being so good in the hall. They all laugh and do it.* The reward for their good behavior is that moment of slightly silly fun.

On the day they made French toast, when it is ready to eat, *Joe squirts syrup on their plates, saying, "Say when, say when." They must know this routine because they say, "When, when." Everyone is laughing.*

A few moments later, one of the children remembers a song about cinnamon (an ingredient in the French toast). They sing the song, called "Cinnamon Bear," and make up a parallel verse about what they are eating: "French, French, Frenchy toast;
It's the one that we like most." Again, there is laughter.

It seems clear that this relaxed and joyful atmosphere is a key part of the classroom culture Joe has created. Perhaps it is summarized in a comment of his at the end of my eighth visit, on November 3. The children were waiting in line, and there was some discussion about the behavior of children in other rooms.

Joe said, "Remember what I said. When you're in my classroom, I'm your Dad. I'm in charge. I'm responsible. They're not in my classroom, so I'm not their Dad. Of course, I'm not your real Dad, right?"

I believe the atmosphere Joe Bastian tries to create in his classroom is in many ways like that of what he envisions as the ideal family. It is an extended family, in which many relatives are accepted and cared about. It is a safe family, in which problems are solved without threats and punishment. And it is a family that laughs together.

Joe Bastian's Classroom as Predictable Text

Another aspect of the way Joe makes the classroom a safe and happy place for the children became clear to me toward the end of my observations. When I was teaching kindergarten, one of the things I was often told was that children, or "these children" (meaning inner-city children) need structure. This seemed to mean that successful teachers had many rules, very strictly enforced. Such an approach didn't seem to mesh with the goals I had for my teaching. But from Joe Bastian's classroom I learned a different meaning for the word *structure*, a meaning that had to do with predictability, rather than enforcement.

In Joe's room, spending time talking about the daily schedule was an important part of the morning gathering on the rug that, as in many kindergartens, begins the day for the children. As in most schools, the plans for each given day could vary a great deal; no permanent daily schedule could possibly be established. During the course of the week, there were recurring special classes, such as music, art, science, computers, and library. As in any good-sized elementary school (Malley Avenue School has about 350 children), scheduling these classes was a complex matter. No class could have its "specials" at a regular time each day. Besides, on any given day one of the teachers of these special classes might be unavailable, either absent or involved in some conflicting activity; there might or might not be a substitute teacher.

There were also numerous school-wide activities, such as assemblies, disrupting the regular schedule of the school. The Milwaukee High Scope program features monthly field trips,

and Joe and his fellow teachers at Malley Avenue often invited guests to speak with the children. Also, the educational assistant or the paraprofessional might be absent or otherwise engaged, disrupting planned schedules.

Nevertheless, Joe gave the children a strong sense of predictability, of knowing what was going to happen, by building each day from familiar blocks of activity, and by talking often with the children about what was happening today. The first time I observed the morning gathering was on my sixth visit, on October 20.

A variety of tasks were completed at this time every day, as they are in many early childhood classrooms. A new day was added to the class calendar. The number of school days since the beginning of school was added to a pocket chart that hung near the rug. The day's weather conditions were posted on a weather chart. Attendance was taken quite informally, with Joe noting aloud who was absent today. A lunch count was taken, and the day's lunch menu was discussed.

But another activity took place that I had not seen before. In a box under his chair, Joe had cards printed with the names of the activities that took place in the classroom. Morning Time, Journals, Plan-Do-Review, Tub Time, Choice Time, Small Group Time, Lunch, Rest Time, Story Time, they said. Others listed the names of the special classes, Music, Art, Science, Computers, and Library. Still others, used less often, said Field Trip, Assembly, Fire Fighter, Walking Trip. There were duplicates for activities that might recur in the same day.

From these cards, which adhered to a flannel board, Joe and the children built the day's schedule every morning. Much of this was so predictable that I noticed that Joe used the identical wording for the same activity on different occasions. The class talked about what they

would do at choice time or small group time, about when specific activities were planned. And all day they adhered to the schedule, referring to it to find out what to do next.

For example, on November 22, *Joe moves to the rug. He asks, "What're we gonna do now?" Many voices say, "Small groups!" There is much excitement. Asking for quiet, Joe says, "Let's do a silent one [countdown for quiet]." He holds up five fingers and folds down one at a time. By the time he gets to the third finger there is quiet.*

Joe asks, "Are we cooking today?" Voices say, "Yes, yes, no, yes." Joe goes on, "What are we cooking?" The excited answer is "Lemonade, lemonade."

On December 19, I was in the room when the children were gathered on the rug for a transition from one activity to the next:

Within a few moments Joe has moved to the rug and gathered their attention. Turning to review the list of planned activities for the day, *he says, "Let's see, did we do our morning time?" Amid many "Yeses," one voice says, "No." Joe looks at the speaker and comments, "That's because you were late. We were doing it. We had a lot of late people today. Did we do journals?" "Yes, yes, yes," say the children. Joe asks, "And what did we finish?" "Journals," the children chorus. Joe goes on, "Now we have tub-time."* [This is a time when children can choose activities, but only from those that are stored in tubs on the shelves -- mostly manipulatives and puzzles of various kinds.]

It was after I had been observing such events for some time that I recognized that Joe's classroom resembles a predictable text. *Predictable text* is a term from the field of literacy. Children are helped in learning to read by being given predictable texts, in which the same patterns or refrains or rhymes recur again and again. In the same way, Joe's classroom routine

was built from predictable activities and predictable events, and the children were daily supported in seeing how they recurred.

The schedule had to change from day to day, meeting the demands of the school and enriching the curriculum for the children. Children might be absent, sometimes for many days, ill or caught in some family crisis or transition, as children who live in poverty often are. They might arrive late at school. But when they arrived, the same blocks of activity would be taking place that had been taking place since the first day of school. And there would be opportunities to find their place in the day whenever there was a transition.

Within this pattern of predictability, Joe's room offered many, many choices and rich activities. On November 22, I wrote,

Very little changes here. The small group material comes out, the decorations change, footprint ghosts hang from the lights and a bunch of balloons appears above the doll corner. But much of what is available is always available. Freedom and abundance are key words in this room.

At plan-do-review and tub time, children select their activities from dozens of possibilities. At choice time, not only do they select which of the activities they want to participate in first or on this day, but almost every activity involves several choices of materials or content. At story time, they often select what Joe will read aloud, or suggest a song to sing. They choose what to write or draw about in their journals; they choose with which teacher (Joe or the paraprofessional) they will share these journals.

At the same visit, I watch the children having "journal time." I write:

With much chatter they carry their journals to seats at the tables, get crayons and markers to use and settle to work. This time of the day is so relaxed. Children are writing,

talking, drawing, making letters. The paraprofessional and Joe are helping various children who ask them. Waves of talk rise and fall.

The teachers who advised me that "these children" need structure might not see the structure that permeates this room, and makes it a safe and predictable place in the children's lives. I write in my notes: *The structure is not one of minute-by-minute demands, or of teachers always deciding what children do, but one of predictability and repetition and reasons for what is happening.*

One of the rewards of this predictability is almost incredible efficiency. On November 22, I noted that it took no more than two minutes, after journal time, for the children to gather on the rug and disperse to their small groups. Just as textual predictability supports the beginning reader in moving quickly and easily through the text, the predictability of the day's activities supported the children in moving through the day with more time for the activities Joe makes available to them.

Teaching Children What They Are Supposed To Do

During my first visit, I noticed that when Joe gave a direct command, "Freeze, everybody," it was promptly obeyed by every child. Already after only a week of school, Joe had established a very specific way to respond in certain situations. I left the school looking forward to learning more about how this had been brought about.

Returning to Joe's room on September 15, I found a teacher-directed activity going on.

It is choice time. [Children are in small groups engaging in activities, mostly with teacher support, that will be repeated through the week until every child has had a chance to participate in every activity.] Joe is kneeling on the rug with seven children, using geoboards and rubber bands. Four girls are working at a table without an adult but near Joe, using markers and

alphabet stamps. At this time, both an aide and a paraprofessional are assigned to the room. Each has a group of six -- one group is making collages with small paper geometric shapes and glue sticks and the other is making a book. The children and the adults talk quietly about what they are doing.

During this visit, I noticed something that it would take me a while to understand.

Joe is talking all the time. He comments on what shapes or pictures the children have made on the geoboards -- houses, airplanes. James is making T's and triangles. Joe suggests they might all try to do what James is doing, and says that at least he is going to try it himself. Joe tells what he is going to do, does it, and then shows it off to the group (recapitulating, informally, the plan-do-review process). He counts how many squares he has made. Now some of the children are trying the same thing -- and even elaborating on it.

Joe also seems to be constantly directing the children's behavior. It's now time to clean up and move on to the next activity. Joe tells this to the seven children on the rug and the four at the table. [On later visits, I recognize that it is up to the aide and the paraprofessional to close their groups when they are ready; sometimes one group arrives late on the rug for the next activity, and no one seems to consider that a problem. This, I believe, reflects Joe's respect for his fellow workers.]

Joe says, "Can you please pick up the rubber bands on the carpet so somebody won't put them in their mouth later today? If you want to play with these [geoboards] later today, the thing to choose is quiet toys [at the plan-do-review time]."

Later I wrote, rather uneasily, in my notes:

My feeling at the end of the last observation was that Joe carries the room on his shoulders -- or more accurately on a tide of his talk. I don't remember feeling this on the first

visit when they were in plan-do-review. But it's the beginning of the year and it was a hot uncomfortable day. Still, this is something to look for....

I was wondering why the other two adults in the room were not doing some of the directing of children. I asked myself how Joe would be able to keep this up during the entire year -- it felt exhausting.

It was only after a few more visits that I realized I was seeing an essential part of Joe's way of developing a structure in which the children could operate successfully. In these early weeks, Joe was engaged in teaching the children what they most needed to know. This was not how to recognize the alphabet letters or how to count; it was how to act in that classroom throughout the day, and throughout the school year. Observations a few weeks later showed far less verbal direction on Joe's part, yet the children were just as clear on what they should do. They had learned what he was teaching.

When I was teaching kindergarten myself, I was often told that it was important to establish the classroom rules early in the year. I would spend time with the children in developing classroom rules, and would review and repeat those rules during the first few days or weeks of school, and later as needed. But Joe Bastian, I believe, understood this idea in a much deeper and more complete way. During the early weeks of the school year, he bathed the children in a flood of directive talk. It was not angry talk or critical talk; instead it was a seemingly never-ending flow of directions, explanations, examples, reasons for what he wanted them to be doing.

Here are some other instances from my notes on the same day:

** As Joe writes [at the children's dictation, on a large pad of paper], he models and talks about not having enough room to write, crossing out, and squeezing your words in small at the*

bottom. He also asks them to identify numbers, to say what letter makes a sound, to help him copy the word journal from the schedule card. He reminds them not to shout: "I can't hear you because James shouted at me."

** Joe says, "What's the rule if you're talking in the hallway when we go out to get your drinks? Do you get your drinks? No! Why do we have to be quiet in the hallway? Because there are other classes out there."*

** It is rest time. Everyone gets a mat from the closet and carries it to Joe. He lays them out and each child lies down on the mat he or she carried. There is some talking. Joe asks, "Now, if we're talking can the person next to us rest? No, so let's be quiet. If you're not tired, just close your eyes and think nice dreams....."*

I couldn't begin to write fast enough to record all the directions, explanations, comments that Joe made during this observation

On September 30, I visited for a fourth time. Again, it was choice time. Joe was on the rug with a group of children and a tub of water, testing their hypotheses about objects that will sink or float. He was still talking a great deal. Directions [*Now, you two go to the house area and find two things that you think will float.],* questions [*What's it made out of? Will it sink or float? Where do we put it -- on the paper labeled float or the one labeled sink?],* just one reprimand [*Please leave the* [plastic] *eggs alone.*] are a steady flow.

When his group is finished putting everything away, he calls all the children to the rug to choose a second activity. There are four things going on [sink-or-float, making a book about the letter B, creating patterns with paper shapes and glue, and using the writing area]. Each child is to choose an activity he or she hasn't done during the first part of choice time; each will have an opportunity to do all four during the week.

This process happened with amazing speed and efficiency. From the time Joe called the children to the rug to the time the first child was making a choice, 90 seconds passed. It took two additional minutes to hear and note each child's choice, and they were back to work in well under five minutes. The only way this can happen is for every child to know what is to be done, and to be reasonably willing to do it. There was no arguing, no resistance to slow things down.

I notice that the children who go to the writing center have to select the materials they will use from nearby shelves. There are markers, rubber stamps, plastic letters, cards with letters and words, various kinds of paper. I write, *They do very well at getting out the appropriate materials. One girl drops her tray of markers on the floor. She picks them up without fuss. As they go, Joe offers a reminder, "And today, no what?" "Computers," comes a chorus of answers.*

Joe sends the members of his group, only four this time, to find something that will float and bring it back to the rug. Charles, a rather anxious-looking boy, has chosen to go to the writing center, and he comes over to Joe and says he wants the girl who is using the alphabet stamps to share with him. Joe asks, "All right, what do you need to do?" Charles goes over and asks her to share. She says, "OK, get a chair." She seems to take it for granted that she will share when asked.

A few minutes later, *Joe looks over at the writing table. He asks one girl to put on the marker tops when she is finished. "Don't worry about it now," he says, "but when you're finished." She says, "OK." Another girl says, "I'll help when we're done."*

This was the day, I realized later, on which I saw an early stage in Joe's transition to the way he would handle most kinds of problems with children's behavior for the rest of the year. Having spent a whole month talking without stopping, it seemed, Joe now was ready to assume that the children knew what they were supposed to do. He was seeing the kinds of positive

responses I've described in the last two paragraphs, and believed that fewer directions were necessary. Instead, he began to ask the children what they should do, either when they approached him with a problem, or when they were not behaving in ways he considered appropriate.

I observed many examples of this kind of questioning on later visits to Joe's classroom. For example, on my eighth visit, on November 3, *Joe gets the kids on the rug together by saying 3 or 4 times, "Are you sitting right? Are you sitting right?"*

During my tenth visit, on November 22:

Joe is helping a few children sound out words for their journals. Most of the other children are on the rug. A few gather to watch the implementer (from the High Scope program) install some new software on the computer. Joe says, "Shawn, Glenda and Christopher, what are you supposed to be doing? Shawn? Are you doing it? Well, please start now." The three children quiet down.

Again, during my twelfth visit, on December 19,

Joe says, "That group right there that I'm looking at.... What am I going to say?" All the children respond, "Quiet, quiet, down, down." Joe says, "Why am I going to say that?" Many voices reply, "Noisy, noisy, noisy...." Joe says, "OK, then..." and it is quiet.

Later on the same day,

Jacinta, Tenise, Chanay, and Loquita have left the area where they are supposed to be. Joe asks, "What am I going to say? The girls respond, "Go back, go back" -- and they do.

Joe's question, "What am I going to say?" is not an angry question, not a critical question, not a threat. Instead, it serves as a reminder that something needs to be noticed, and each time he asks it the children he is speaking to seem to have a clear idea of what the rules are for them. It

would be possible to compile a list of "the rules" by recording all these questions and their answers. But the classroom has a formal set of rules, and they are quite simple:

The "Room 114 Rules" are posted on the wall. They are:

1. Keep your hands and feet to yourself.

2. Listen when somebody is talking.

3. Handle things at Malley Avenue School with care.

4. Treat people with respect.

5. Use inside voices inside.

I occasionally saw rules 2, 3 and 5 broken, but not to an extent that seemed like a problem to me. My notes record that on December 19,

I ask some children what the rules are in the room, and the answers they give me seem more concrete:

Be nice.

Listen.

Pick the area you want to be in.

You have to put the toys away.

Be quiet when he reads us a story.

These simple rules in some combination seem to be the ones that every child in this room knows, and Joe's questions serve to instantiate them. What does it mean to respect others? What does it mean to be nice? The children learn this first through Joe's steady flow of directive talk and later through his questions. The rules provide a secure framework in which the children can live.

Joe also focuses from the beginning on giving reasons for the rules he expects the children to follow, as well as reasons for various events in the room. Here are some examples from visits ranging from the second to the thirteenth:

Joe asks at cleanup time, "Can you please pick up the rubber bands on the carpet so somebody won't put them in their mouth later today?"

Joe asks when it's time, on a hot day, to get a drink as a group, "What's the rule if you're talking in the hallway getting your drinks? Do you get your drinks? No! Why do we have to be quiet in the hallway? Because there are other classes out there."

Joe says, when they are going over the lunch menu, "You can say m-m-m but not u-g-h-h because someone might like cantaloupe."

Joe asks, when it's time to move into small groups, *"OK, Group 2, who's in charge? Shantwa, you hand out the sticky tape. Michael, you hand out the letters." Marques says, "I want to be in charge." Joe responds, "You did it before, Marques. It's their turn."*

This morning Joe is explaining why this week isn't exactly like other weeks, this day exactly like other days. *He says, "Only three school days this week and Mr. Bastian had to go to a funeral yesterday."*

Added to the children's thorough knowledge of what is expected, this torrent of explanations functions to make everything that happens in the room make sense. Young children's lives can seem arbitrary, subject to the whims of adults and to demands and necessities of which they are ignorant. But in Joe Bastian's classroom, a child can be quite sure of knowing why things are happening, why things are expected.

Conclusions

I went to Joe's classroom looking for answers to my question, "What happens in this classroom that helps students to get along so well?" What I found seemed to fall naturally into three overlapping categories. Joe made extensive efforts to establish a safe, warm, environment, for the children. He made many connections, both directly and through classroom talk, with their families. He established the idea that things can go wrong, but a child doesn't have to be afraid of getting into trouble. And he made the classroom a place where laughing and joking were common events.

Second, Joe's classroom was predictable without being rigid. I compared it to a beginning reader's predictable text that offers support in learning to read. Joe's classroom, made of predictable chunks of activity that were often repeated, offered children support in learning how to be in school.

And third, Joe carefully taught children what they were supposed to do in school, at first through a stream of directions, and later through his questions and explanations. His instantiations of the classroom's simple rules developed a sense of security in the children about what was expected of them.

These efforts and policies of Joe's did more than create a classroom that was a pleasure to be in for me, and I think for the children. It also gave twenty-five children the sense that school was a safe place, a place in which you could learn and grow and not be afraid. I'm convinced that in doing this Joe prepared the children -- his children, as he would say -- to be successful learners in future years.

Later I talked with Joe about what he felt was not good about his room, what I might not have seen that was a problem. His response reflected his deep concern for every child in his classroom. "I worry about the low kids, the lost ones, the quiet ones, the ones that look like they

are listening but they just don't seem to be really there. This year I had three kids that just didn't get it. You know, every year I have kids that finish kindergarten reading at a first grade, a second grade level. But there were these three that just didn't....."

I don't want to belittle Joe's concerns, but I think they need to be placed in a context. Every child that I saw in Joe's classroom, even the few who didn't make the academic progress Joe would have liked to see, did learn that school can be a safe, happy place, and learned a way to act in school that had potential for their future learning.

Figure 1. Strategies used in Joe Bastian's classroom

I. Creating a safe, warm environment

   Making connections with home and family

   Nothing bad is going to happen

   Laughing and joking

II. Making the classroom a predictable text

III. Teaching children what they are supposed to do

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